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Sandinista Military Actions and Intentions

Summary: Managua's 22/23 March 1986 incursion into Honduras cost it heavy casualties and bad publicity, but it served a longstanding Sandinista strategy that the Sandinistas will continue to pursue despite the consequences. The strategic goal of the Sandinistas is the absolute destruction of the Democratic Resistance which, along with the Catholic Church, represents the only true obstacle to the consolidation of Marxism/Leninism in Nicaragua. They do not intend to be deterred from the pursuit of this goal by such considerations as international publicity or deliberations in the U.S. Congress. While Sandinista diplomacy has been geared toward efforts to influence U.S. Congressional votes, such issues are secondary to their strategic plan. This explains why Daniel Ortega travelled to the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the vote by the House of Representatives against all aid to the Democratic Resistance, and why it launched punitive attacks deep within Honduras shortly after the House voted to reject military aid to the Resistance. It is not that the Sandinistas wished to alienate Congress; rather, it was simply a matter of priorities. This signifies that the Sandinistas will again cross the Honduran border in strength to attack rebel Nicaraguan support bases. The following suggests that another incursion could take place in the near term.

- The Sandinistas continue to hold positions just inside Honduras at Banco Grande, Par Par, Plis, and San Andres de Bocay. This, coupled with the fact that Sandinista forces are being replaced and reinforced, suggests that renewed efforts will be made to stage another incursion, probably before the rainy season begins in the next six weeks. In view of the fact that the incursions of 22/23 March were such a costly tactical venture for the Nicaraguan Army and its Cuban advisors, it can be expected that the next assaults will be more carefully prepared and better supported logistically, including more artillery and possibly with air support. The Sandinistas are also likely to use more personnel in the future incursions to avoid the tactical defeat they suffered in the 22/23 March assault.
- The Sandinistas continue to serve notice in their public statements of a more belligerent posture on the border, contending that Tegucigalpa has yielded sovereignty to the Democratic Resistance in the area and that, essentially, it is now a no man's land. This seems designed to prepare international opinion for additional, and perhaps larger, Sandinista incursions into Honduran territory.

Background: Since early 1986 the Sandinistas have focused their military activities primarily on disrupting UNO/FDN infiltration efforts while at the same time attempting to prevent the resupply of insurgent units operating deep

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inside Nicaragua.

- On 4 January the Sandinistas began shelling points near Banco Grande and Plis.
- An estimated 800 - 1,000 Nicaraguan troops occupied the area of Bolinkey on 7 January after several days of shelling.
- In mid-February elements of several Sandinista infantry battalions attacked Banco Grande and Par Par.
- On 7 March elements of at least two BLI's attacked San Andres de Bocay. This was followed on 10 March by an attack near Bolinkey.
- The most recent actions by the Sandinistas occurred on the weekend of 22/23 March and involved the largest and deepest penetration of Honduran territory by the Nicaraguans. In all, an estimated troop strength in excess of 2,000 men attacked positions stretching from the Las Vegas Salient to San Andres de Bocay.
- The Sandinistas began moving into attack positions in early March. By 21 March an estimated 1,200 troops had moved into an assembly area inside the Las Vegas Salient.
- Early on 22 March the Nicaraguans launched a three-pronged attack across the Honduran border to hit strategic objectives. Another Nicaraguan force of perhaps 700 entered the salient simultaneously from the southeast and west, and at about the same time some 500 troops occupied an airstrip at San Andres de Bocay. After three days of heavy fighting, the Sandinistas retreated in some disorganization toward the border.
- It also appears that the Sandinistas were preparing for additional actions in the western portion of the salient.
- Nonetheless, the Nicaraguans did conduct a series of border-area attacks against UNO/KISAN forces in the northeast between 25 and 27 March. Using mostly aircraft and artillery fire, the Sandinistas have caused an exodus--which could reach 5,000--of Miskito refugees into Honduras.

Conclusion: It is anticipated that--short of a stronger Honduran military and diplomatic response to the Sandinista pressures--the only effective deterrent to the continuation of this strategic policy of border violations is a strong UNO/FDN. When the Democratic Resistance becomes active enough inside Nicaragua and operates in strength behind Sandinista lines and with a dependable system of resupply, Managua will be forced to disperse its troop concentration on the border to meet the threat in central Nicaragua.